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Featured Article:

Berlin After the Wall: Decades After Its Fall, History Still Haunts

By Cassie R. Leventhal

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1



Game Changer—any person, institution, or event whose action significantly alters the current environment and status quo—for better or for worse. They come in many different shapes and sizes; from presidents to technological giants such as Apple, or a baseball play where the runner steals home to win the series. Regardless of their area of concentration, these actions and events shape the course of history. All of these people and events are memorable in the minds of those affected. But what about the game changer that has no actual voice or for that matter is in fact, inanimate? For 28 years the Berlin Wall stood intact as the physical manifestation and symbol of the Cold War. Surrounding West Berlin, the Wall was more than a physical disturbance and dissection; it was a societal and cultural faction to all Berliners. An event so catastrophic, something so terrifying to those around it, that the only way to survive was to fight against the Wall through jokes in the East and art in the West. Though it no longer stands looming amongst the streets of Berlin, more than 20 years since its dismantling the Wall continues to remain a ghost, haunting Berliners in their quest to document history, reunite as a city, and chart a course for the future.

Though the Wall was physically manifest on a mid-summer night's eve in 1961, Berlin had been a breeding ground of tension between the Eastern and Western powers since the end of World War II in 1945. The partition of Berlin on May 8th of that year into four occupation zones planted the seeds which would mature in to conflict, as each country—the U.S., England, France and the Soviets—followed different ideologies and thus held conflicting motives entering the city. Numerous events occurred since Berlin's initial era of occupation that led to increased tension as the alliances among the Allies quickly disintegrated. The shooting war between the Allies and the Axis was slowly being replaced by the Cold War between Eastern and Western powers. Such events include the Berlin Blockade and subsequent Berlin Airlift.

A part of the economic aid extended to West Germany under the Marshall Plan in 1948 included currency reform to halt the rampant inflation of the Reichsmark, introduced on June 18th of that year. Following the announcement of the Deutschemark, Soviet guards began to halt all passenger trains and traffic on the autobahn. The new Deutschemark was never intended for use in Berlin; however, the Soviets' imposition of the Reichsmark over the entire city provoked the Americans to start issuing the new bills in Berlin on June 24th (Large 401). As a direct result the Soviets counteracted, and by the twenty-fifth of that month all land, water, electricity, rail, barge, and food supply to the 2.1 million inhabitants of West Berlin was cut off. On the twenty-sixth

Truman gave the orders for the Berlin Airlift began, with American planes flying 5,560 tons in supplies West Berlin, with its peak having planes land every 90 seconds at Tempelhof Airport, and lasted till the end of the Blockade on May 12th 1949 (408).

During the time of the Berlin Airlift, competing ideologies in Berlin and throughout Germany resulted in conflicting nation states, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) founded May 1949 and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) becoming established October 7th 1949. The partition of Germany, thought initially informal and permeable, became increasingly rigid as the Cold War intensified. The two vastly different political systems and ideologies coexisted in Berlin side by side, uncomfortably at best. The potential for higher wages, freedom to travel and overall increased quality of life led the people of Berlin to vote with their feet for their preferable ideology (Héon-Klin 369). As a result, the East German government took measures to inhibit contacts between the two halves of the city (Large 425). In 1952 the GDR cut the telephone links to the West and the following year suspended bus and tram service as well as East German leaders realized their citizens were becoming tempted by the fruits of capitalism (Ladd 19). In May 26th 1952, the GDR government barricaded its border with West Germany, making Berlin anomaly in the Eastern Bloc.

In total, around 2.3 million East Germans fled to West Germany, using West Berlin as their escape path. In the second half of 1952, 48,831 GDR citizens went from East to West, and in the first quarter of 1953 the number almost doubled, to 84,034 (Large 425). Most of those fleeing West included young and well-educated youth of the GDR, the “kind of people that no state can afford to lose,” (425). Moreover, West Berlin was enjoying tax breaks and aid from the West German government through the Berlinhilfe (Berlin Aid) Policy in 1953 alongside money from Washington through the Marshall Plan to help the city rebuild after the war. In contrast, though East Berlin was not as initially poor as its Western counterpart, there was little room for prospects of improvement as “its economy was tightly integrated into that of the new East German state, which in turn was wrapped in the Soviets’ straitjacket of centralized planning,” (417). The economy was already burdened by agricultural collectivization, nationalization of industry, neglect of consumer goods, unrealistic productivity quotas, and the huge costs of building up a quasi army. Though the number of refugees entering West Berlin from East Berlin calmed down during the late 1950’s, the mass exodus increased since early 1960, increasing significantly in numbers from month to month. Most of those fleeing contained the mindset and reasoned that they better get out while they still could (425). This mass migration and exodus of East Germans over the years did not help, and put a massive strain on the East German economy due to labor shortages as factories in the East were curtailing production for want of workers and some shops closed because their clerks had gone West.

The climax to all of this mounting tension would take place the night of August 13th 1961 under the direction of Communist GDR leader Walter Ulbricht. Preliminary rolls of barbed wire were stretched across the demarcation line dividing the Western Allies from the Soviet sector in Berlin. The Brandenburg Gate was closed the following day, and by the 15th of August the first pieces of concrete were put up (Ladd 17). After August 26th, all crossing points were closed for West Berlin citizens. Though this version of the Wall resembled more of a “backyard fence” compared to the future stages of the Wall in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the effects were immediately felt. Overnight on August 13th 61,000 people who worked on one side and lived on the other lost

their jobs (12). The shock and awe of the Wall's construction mainly lay in the sudden elimination of the element of choice and free will amongst Berliners. Residents were stunned, and people in both parts of the city felt helpless and powerless, watching their physical environment shift right before their eyes. Families and lovers blew kissed and waved handkerchiefs to loved ones on the other side while others shouted insults and threw stones at the fence-builders (Large 450). Heinrich Albertz, an aide to West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt, commented "They are cutting up a city, cutting into living flesh without anesthesia," (451).

In both the East and West, Berliners felt a deep sense of loss for the other part of the city. As described by one woman of East Berlin, "I drove aimlessly through Berlin, looking at checkpoints one knew. For the first time I had the feeling of being locked in forever. I suddenly had this feeling: I can never get out of here," (Héon-Klin 371). The leaders of the former sectors of occupation—Britain, France, and America—saw "no reason for alarm in the Soviet/East German action, so long as Western rights in Berlin were not challenged (Large 451). West Berlin overnight had become an island in East Germany, only linked to West Germany through controlled air-, rail-, and roadways. Initially, many residents felt that the Western government might abandon them. As one West Berlin woman remembered, "A certain anxiety concerning the GDR was there in the first years of the Wall...One just did not trust the politicians totally and we thought they might sell us to them, us, this little piece of Berlin. They (Bonn) might give up on us some day. This anxiety was always there," (Héon-Klin 372).

Entitled as Operation Chinese Wall, Ulbricht had begun to imagine the Berlin Wall since as early as June of 1961. On the fifth of that month, Ulbricht "almost let the cat out of the bag" by blurting out at a press conference that "No one intends to build a wall." (Large 449). Taller and stronger barriers slowly replaced the hastily erected block-and-mortar wall (Ladd 17). Over the 28 years of its existence there were four versions of the Wall and a fifth being drafted at the time of its demise. At its final stage before the fall, which was introduced in 1976, the Wall consisted of a 166-kilometer belt that encircled West Berlin, of which 48 of those kilometers ran through the city center. Those in West Berlin witnessed a wall made from pre-fabricated, high-density concrete segments. Each of these segments produced a smooth surface at a width of 1.2 meters, a height of 3.6 meters, capped with heavy concrete piping so that no grappling hooks could be positioned at top of it. (17-8).

The view from East Berlin was, however, radically different; what appeared as a wall in the West resembled a border fortification system for the East. The divide between East and West Berlin varied in width from six to 500 meters. In this patch of land between the outer walls held an entire defense system containing raked ground and observation towers every 100 meters. What later became coined as the "death strip" also contained electrical fences, trip wires, warning devices, dog patrol paths, spotlights, convey paths with vehicle patrols, line markings for border guards, automatic lighting systems, protective bunkers, deep trenches for vehicles, steel nails, and barbed wire (Large 452, Bawey, Héon-Klin 371). Houses were vacated and even churches were demolished to make way for this beast. The wall also came to symbolize a set of activities such as "searches, patrols, observation, and identification checks at the crossing points," (Ladd 18). Easterners had a feeling of insecurity about what might happen to those living near the Wall.

People on both sides of the Wall felt vulnerable. Consequently, a battle emerged as each

political ideology put forth the effort to make the Berlin Wall comprehensible to residents in ways that would justify its cause. Eastern officials knighted it as the “antifascist protective rampart,” (18). Their careful diction implies that the newly constructed edifice serves the traditional purpose of a wall, similar to The Great Wall of China, by keeping enemies out and protecting the people. The Eastern government justified their work as a necessity to define the people against the “atavistic forces of the West,” (23). For the East, “fascism” was the biggest threat to their goals of social progress. By the 1980’s, East Germany rarely “referred to any physical structure, speaking rather of “the border” or of “border security”, in addition to the use of the word “Wall” (*Mauer*), was strictly forbidden (18).Continued on Next Page »